

D. Michael “Mike” Cunningham

November 8, 1919 – April 12, 2015

An extraordinary man who lived an amazing life, - and then some!

1919-1940

Mike Cunningham was born in Akron, OH. His parents were English and Irish immigrants. His father was Michael Joseph Cunningham of the village of Lisvernane in the Glen of Aherlow, County Tipperary, Ireland (born 5/23/1858– died 1/25/1920). His mother was Dorothy Setterfield (nee Butcher) Cunningham (born 9/22/1892- died 3/11/1945).

At the time Mike was born, his father was employed as personal chef to the Harvey Firestone family of Firestone Tire of Akron, OH. There is actually a picture of his father in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, MI. The picture shows four men out camping: Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and Michael Joseph Cunningham. As Harvey Firestone’s personal chef, he went on those camping trips to do the cooking!

His father, Michael Joseph, was one of twelve children born to George Cunningham (born 1792, died 6/2/1878) and Mary Godfrey (born 1814, died 9/16/1884). He originally entered the Brothers of Marion Order along with one of his brothers. When that brother died, he asked to leave the Order, and they sent him to France for one year to be classically trained as a chef before he left the Order. He later immigrated to the United States through Ellis Island. He lived for a time in Pittsburgh and later settled in Akron, OH.

His father was married a total of three times. There were no children born of his marriage to his first wife, who died very young of natural causes in Pittsburgh, PA.

His second wife, Grace O’Byrne (born 11/27/1880-died 6/24/1913) was one of twelve children as well! Her marriage to Michael Joseph produced three children: George, Dudley, and Una. When their mother died, the children were taken back to Ireland to live with the O’Byrne family, and due to WWI, they never returned to the USA during his lifetime. George was killed doing bomb disposal work in London during WWII; Una married and settled

in England; and Dudley left Ireland for England, then signed on a freighter as a deckhand and traveled to Australia where he likewise settled, married, and raised a family. He served as a forward observer for the Australian Army during WWII in New Guinea. He proudly maintained an American, Irish, and Australian passport throughout his life.

His mother Dorothy was the third wife of Michael Joseph Cunningham. She was born in Ambala, India while her father Sergeant Major Jack Butcher of the British Army was stationed there.

Mike did not learn about all of his Irish siblings and other relatives until after he returned from WWII and sent letters to names in his mothers' address book he found after her death.

When her husband died two months after Mike was born, she eventually moved to Cincinnati, OH, where she met and married a carpenter named Thomas Andrew Frisby (born 10/31/1873- died 1942). She had four children with Thomas Frisby. They were Mary Agnes Frisby, Rosemary Becker, Dolores Covert, and Mark Frisby.

All of his siblings have predeceased him.

Growing up during the Depression was very, very difficult for Mike. His stepfather Thomas Frisby became paralyzed from the waist down due to consuming poisoned liquor during the Depression, and never worked again.

Mike told stories about how they survived due to the charity they received from Catholic Charities for basics such as day old bread, food, clothing, and shoes. He shoveled coal into homes for money, and picked up coal off of the tracks to heat their apartment. He also did any other work he could find. He cleaned chicken coops, which lead to him going totally blind in one eye later in life.

Finally, when his mother could no longer feed him, he was sent to the Mount Alverno Home for Boys to live for several years. During his time there, in addition to his regular studies, he worked in the fields planting and harvesting crops, and resoled shoes among other duties. He did however learn three skills that he used throughout the rest of his life: accounting, bookkeeping, and shorthand.

He later attended Purcell High School, and graduated, ranked second in his class in 1937. Following high school, he worked various jobs as a clerk typist for a law firm, then for Dodge Reports, and later went to work for the US Army Corps of Engineers in Dayton, OH.

1941-2015

He met his wife Velma Lorraine Bratcher of St. Bernard, Cincinnati, OH at a social function held by the Newman Club of the University of Cincinnati. Mike met her by taking her picture, and developing pictures himself. He was an avid amateur photographer. They were married on May 9, 1942, and remained married for 68 years until her death in 2010 at their home from natural causes.



With the outbreak of WWII, he enlisted in the US Army Air Corps. He was trained as a Navigator to fly B-29 bombers, and commissioned a Lt. During training, they traveled to various bases in TX and KS, with Velma joining him at times when they could find living quarters off base. His training also took him to an unexpected location when practicing over water flying, - Cuba!

During the war, he was stationed on Guam. He won the honor of naming their plane, and he named it “City of Cincinnati” in honor of his hometown. They were crew #43 of the 93rd Squadron of the 19th Bomb Group. They flew 25 missions over Japan in total. Their last two missions over Japan were to drop supplies at a POW camp, and they also flew over Tokyo Bay during the official surrender of Japan.

He took and developed many pictures during the war. He traded his liquor rations to get the Seabee’s to build him a darkroom he could use, along with an Officer’s Clubhouse.

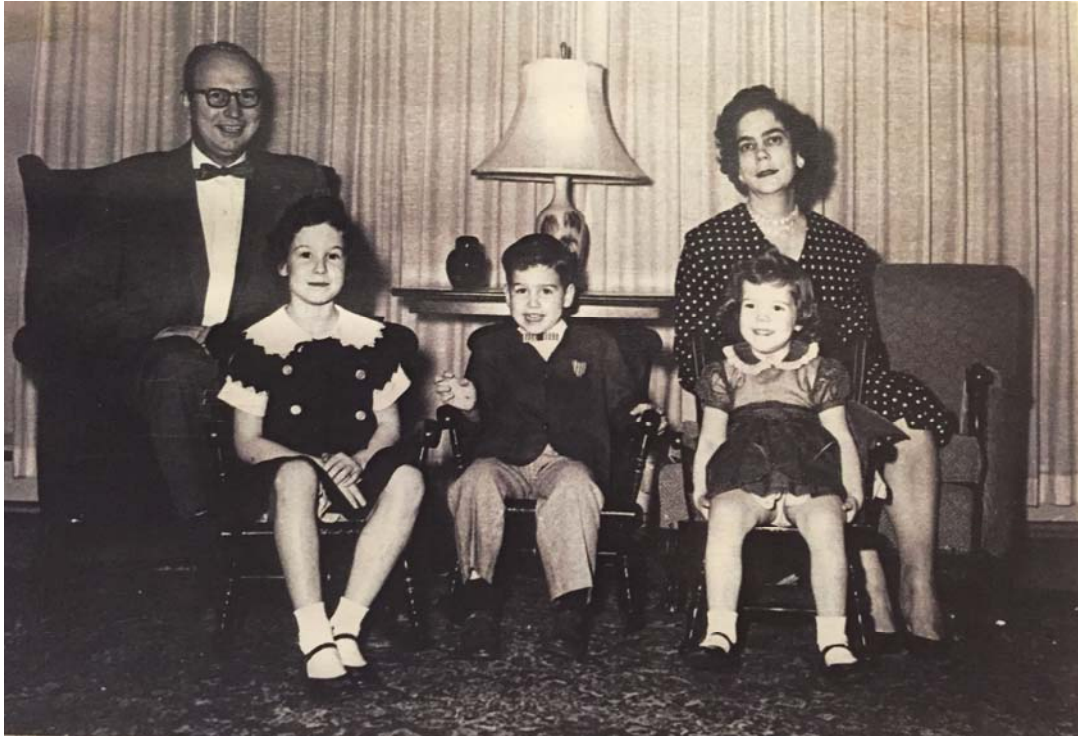
In March of 1945 during a night raid over Tokyo, they were nearly shot down by a Japanese fighter, and from flak. After losing one engine, they had to make an emergency landing on Iwo Jima. They were one of the early B-29’s to do that, and one of over 2,200 B-29’s to make emergency landings there during the war. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with three Oak Leaf Cluster; four Army Air Medals, and the Pacific Theater Medal. He was interviewed by Milton Chase of Cincinnati that was broadcast on the radio on 5/25/1945. He was interviewed about his wartime service by Cliff Radel of The Cincinnati Enquirer on 8/6/2004. He was the subject of a My View column in the Buffalo News on 8/6/2011. Lastly, he was interviewed and profiled by Lou Michel of the Buffalo News for the Saluting Our War Heroes series on 8/6/2012.

He returned from the war at the end of 1945, and attended the University of Cincinnati. He entered a 5 year co-op program for Mechanical Engineering. His co-op work was done at the Cincinnati Milling Machine Company, now known as Cincinnati Milacron. He graduated in 1951, ranked 2nd in the class of 501 Mechanical Engineers. He was also given an award by the University of Cincinnati Engineering Faculty for being the “Outstanding Engineer of the Class of 1951”. During college, he played football, and also lettered in Fencing. He was a member of two Honorary Fraternities: Pi Tau Sigma, and Tau Beta Pi.

Upon graduation, he went to work for E. I. Dupont Company in the central engineering department in Wilmington, DE. In 1953, he was recruited by Robert Carrier, founder of the Carrier Conveyor Company of Louisville, KY (now known as Carrier Vibrating Equipment, Inc. and the worldwide leader in vibrating process equipment) to be Manager of Engineering and Sales.

He is a patent holder for features used by Carrier to present day.

While in Louisville, he became the father to three children, - Denise Michelle, Brendan Patrick, and Deidre Maire.



In 1958, he left Carrier to become a Manufacturer's Sales Representative for Carrier Conveyor and several other companies in upstate New York. He settled in Orchard Park, NY. He founded the Cunningham Company, and in 1977, his son Brendan joined him in the business. He "semi" officially retired upon the death of Velma in 2010, but continued to consult until his death.

On a personal level, Mike led an amazing life. He started with absolutely nothing, and became a self made man. His trademark look in business was a suit with a bow tie.

He enjoyed golf and tennis, and played both into his 90's. He was a lifetime member of the Orchard Park Country Club. He served as an usher, taught religious education classes, and was a member of the Altar and Rosary Society of his parish, Nativity of Our Lord in Orchard Park.

Although he was blind in one eye, and had no depth perception, which resulted in his never being a very good golfer, he loved to be on the golf course on Saturdays. He loved it just for the pure enjoyment of being outside, and for the good shots that every golfer enjoys at least now and then. He once shot a Hole in One on Hole Number 2 at OPCC.

He was very proud to be a member of the ROMEO Club of Orchard Park. The club consists of retired business executives, and the name actually stands for “Retired Old Men Eating Out”, which they do every month!

He rarely drank alcohol, other than perhaps one cold beer after a round of golf on a hot summer day.

He continued to drive his car until he was 93, and his NY driver’s license was valid until his 100th birthday! He drove well over 2 million miles in his life without a serious accident.

He took up downhill and cross country skiing at 50, and continued both into his 70’s. He was a very good ice skater as well.

He liked to travel, and traveled around the world twice, visiting his relatives in England, Ireland, Australia, and the Grand Caymans along the way, with his wife Velma at his side.



He was a voracious reader, and read everything he could get his hands on. He was always circling articles for follow up, cutting them out, and sending copies to people he thought would like to see them.

On a professional level, he wanted to understand every type of machine he sold or worked with, and he spent many hours reverse engineering all of them. There was truly nothing he did not understand, or that he could not explain in detail how they were designed and functioned. He really enjoyed explaining to anyone who was interested how those machines and processes worked!

He was faster with a slide rule than a calculator. He was an absolute wizard at math, and could solve complex problems in his head while making them look ridiculously easy.

One reason he never became filthy rich, was because he would spend as much time as it took helping a potential customer solve a bulk material handling problem, regardless of whether the solution he sold cost \$150.00 or \$100,000.00. He thoroughly enjoyed his chosen profession every single day.

He loved animals, and especially cats and dogs. He was a pacifist at heart, and avoided a fight with anyone at all costs. At 6'3", he was a gentle giant. He regularly gave away money to those less fortunate because he knew what it was like to grow up hungry or poor. He was a kind and gentle man toward everyone he ever knew.

He had an iron constitution, and loved to order the strangest thing on the menu just to see what it tasted like. As his close friend Jack Mallow once said, "he has a great appetite and never missed a meal!".

Dad died at home, peacefully, in his bed at 9:58 PM on Sunday April 12, 2015, just as he had asked, with family at his side. He did not want to die in a nursing home, and with the extraordinary help of Gail Gruber, he was able to do exactly that. He was absolutely certain about his faith, in the power of prayer, and of his eternal reward.

Rest easy dad, and enjoy your life in Heaven with mom. We'll meet again someday, but hopefully not just yet.